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ABSTRACT

To examine how media content is influenced by journalists' role concepts and organizational characteristics, a study used data which was originally gathered from telephone interviews with 1,001 American journalists conducted between December 1982 and February 1983, and which served as the basis for "The American Journalist: A Portrait of U.S. News People and Their Work" by David H. Weaver and G. Cleveland Wilhoit. The content variable was determined by a content analysis of journalists' responses to several open-ended questions about a story that represented some of their "best work" from the previous year, employing Weaver and Wilhoit's content categories--disseminator, interpretive, and adversarial. Discriminant analysis was used to examine the variables of media type, organizational characteristics, journalists' role orientation, and individual characteristics which could predict membership in the content groups. Analysis revealed that organizational characteristics had a stronger influence in shaping the content produced than did journalists' conceptions of their own role, although other individual characteristics of journalists were also significant in discriminating among content categories. Organizational characteristics--especially the type of media organizations where journalists work and the size of those organizations--were strong predictors of content category. (Five tables of data are included and nine references are appended.) (MM)

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CONCEPTIONS, CHARACTERISTICS AND CONTENT:

HOW JOURNALISTS' ROLE CONCEPTIONS AND THE CHARACTERISTICS OF MEDIA ORGANIZATIONS INFLUENCE THE NEWS

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CONCEPTIONS, CHARACTERISTICS AND CONTENT:

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The study of media content and how it is influenced by various forces is an area of importance equal in the field of mass communication to the influence that media content has on readers and viewers, their behaviors and beliefs, and the resulting effect on culture and society as a whole. Yet in studying empirically the uses and effects of media content, mass communication scholars have given short shrift to the empirical study of forces with influence on media content--especially the study of journalists' attitudes and characteristics and media organizations' characteristics and constraints.

In his 1974 monograph defining a gatekeeping theory of uncertainty, Dimmick suggested that journalists who hold different self-concepts of their roles as journalists also would be likely to differ in their judgments about what defines the relative newsworthiness of a set of news stories. "[I]t seems obvious that the criteria by which a gatekeeper judges an event to be news will be determined to some extent by the way he views his role as a journalist," Dimmick wrote (p. 19).

But such a relationship may not be so obvious. Sigal (1973) has suggested that role conceptions might only marginally affect job performance, especially when organizational incentives or constraints are in place. Only when work is not structured by organizational incentives, Sigal suggests, is it likely that the

journalist would take the opportunity to act according to the role he perceived for himself. Thus, when considering the relationship between journalist role conceptions and content, the imposing constraints of the media organization for which the journalist works cannot be ignored.

Writing 13 years later, Sigal (1986) reiterates the notion that the individual journalists' political attitudes are less important in the selection of news than are other factors, and underscores that the issue has not yet been fully resolved:

> ...the relationship between news content and journalists' personal political beliefs is a tenuous one, not yet demonstrated by systematic studies. Nor should that be surprising. News is, after all, not what journalists think, but what their sources say, and is mediated by news organizations, journalistic routines and conventions, which screens out many of the personal predilections of individual journalists (p. 29).

This study addresses these questions about content, journalists' role conceptions and media organization constraints by focusing on journalists' attitudes about their role as a journalist and several characteristics of the media organizations where they work as an influence on their "best" content produced from the last year. The data used were originally gathered by Weaver and Wilhoit (1986) for their study of American journalists. This study adds content analysis of several open-ended questions about respondents' "best work" (unanalyzed in the original study), and employs discriminant analysis and crosstabulation of variables to better understand the relationships between content, journalists' attitudes and characteristics, and media organization characteristics.

The content variable for this study will be measured by

open-ended questions about a story that represents some of the respondents' "best work" from the past year. There are both advantages and disadvantages to this approach. First is the disadvantage of working from descriptions of content as opposed to actual media content. This constraint is imposed by working with previously collected data and is thus beyond the researcher's control. Weighed against the advantages that can be realized from secondary analysis, it seems clear that this study can still make a substantial contribution to the understanding of influences on news content.

Descriptions of "best work," however, should be considered highly appropriate content for the testing of a theory that suggests connections between journalists' role conceptions and actual content. Work self-described by the journalist as his or her "best" can be expected to exhibit characteristics of journalism at its best. Since the journalists' own role conceptions are a measure of their perceptions about what journalism at its best might be, it is logical to expect that the two--role conception and content--will exhibit corresponding characteristics. If there is not a high level of correspondence between the two, then the notion that journalists' own attitudes influence news content might be re-examined.

The use of best work also poses the disadvantage that many of the constraints present in routine work may not be evident in stories self-selected by journalists as their best. A journalist working for an organization with a daily story quota might be more likely to discuss as "best work" the one story written in

the past year when several weeks were devoted to investigation and research. These limitations are recognized and will serve to place the results of this study in perspective.

Because this study is in many ways exploratory, several research questions will direct the work. The nature of the relationships between news content and journalists and organizational characteristics have not been clearly established in other studies, and it would be premature to predict the direction of influence one way or the other.

Question 1: How will journalists' adherence to one of three journalistic role conceptions--either adversarial, interpretive or disseminator--be related to differences in characteristics of the content they discuss as their "best work?"

Question 2: Will other journalist characteristics such as age, sex, political orientation or income be related to variations in content?

Question 3: How will organizational characteristics such as type of medium, organization size, and unionized editorial staff influence the content journalists produce?

The Theoretical Framework

Interest in the way journalists view their own professional roles is long-standing, although much of that work is descriptive and fails to establish relationships between role conceptions and content. Johnstone et. al. (1976) found evidence among journalists for two competing beliefs or ideologies--the neutral reporter and the participant reporter. Neutral journalists were more likely to be from small towns with little social contact

with other journalists, and participant journalists tended to be from large cities with extensive social contact with other journalists. They found most journalists identified with both the neutral and participant views, but that subgroups clustered around each distinct ideology.

Culbertson (1983) identified and defined three belief "clusters," labeled interpretive, traditional and activist. He also looked for connections between journalists who belonged to each of these groups and the content of stories they wrote. Traditionalists tended to emphasize local and spot news over interpretive and national/international stories; activists and interpreters tended to place less emphasis on local news, although interpreters played up national news, while activists emphasized international news.

Starck and Soloski (1977) considered the relationship between 36 student subjects who identified with either the participant or neutral function of the press and stories they produced in an experimental setting. Their hypothesis that reporters with high participant bias tended to produce stories containing interpretation and analysis was supported. A large percentage of low participant reporters produced stories without interpretation or analysis (they called these "news" stories). The researchers speculate this occurred because low participant reporters were aware of their biases and went out of their way to compensate for them by writing news-oriented stories. Reporters in the high participant category were the least likely of the three categories (high participant, low participant, and neutral)

to produce stories that were objective. The high participants wrote the most interesting stories while neutral reporters wrote the least comprehensive stories. However, the low participant reporters were found to produce the most fair, accurate, objective and comprehensive stories--the highest rated stories.

In a study of news coverage of a state legislature, Fico (1982) identified four distinct groups holding "role self-concepts"--neutrals, translators, participants and "weak role" (no real role orientation). He found that journalists' role self-concepts had an influence on the interaction between journalists and legislative sources. Journalists who subscribed to a particular role, for example, tended to use a higher number of sources in the stories they produced about the legislature. But journalists who did not identify strongly with any role self-concept used fewer sources. The use of sources was influenced even more by the journalist's perception of what his editor wanted--an organizational constraint.

Weaver and Wilhoit (1986) also found evidence for three distinct belief concepts--concepts similar to those developed by Culbertson. Weaver and Wilhoit, however, use the labels adversarial, interpretive and disseminator to distinguish between the three attitudes journalists hold about their own roles. They found that the dominant role was the interpretive, with disseminator second. Very few in their study identified with the adversarial role. However, they found that journalists were also pluralistic in their media role concepts--a third of those they studied identified with both the interpretive and disseminator orientations.

Weaver and Wilhoit also examined the correlates of these journalistic roles, but find that much of the variance in attitudes cannot be explained by factors like age, sex, and other demographic variables. However, they do find that the best predictors of role orientation are organizational factors. Journalists with high salaries were more likely to adhere to the interpreter role over the disseminator role, a finding that Weaver and Wilhoit interpret as representing the "star" reporters who have high salaries and favor the interpretive approach. Attitudes about the job also had predictive power: journalists who valued autonomy or received feedback from news sources were more likely to follow the interpreter role; those who valued job security were likely to favor the disseminator role. Education was also a predictor, although not a powerful one, of role orientation. The more education a journalist had, the least likely he or she was to favor the disseminator role. And politically, journalists who describe themselves as conservative were found to favor the disseminator role but not the adversarial.

Weaver and Wilhoit also found slight differences between print journalists, who were more likely to follow the interpretive role and to be more tolerant of the adversarial role, and broadcast journalists, who were more likely to follow the disseminator role, especially those in radio. And reporters were more likely to follow the interpretive or adversarial roles than were editors.

Methodology

The data used in this study were originally gathered by telephone interviews with 1,001 American journalists between December 1982 and February 1983 and served as the basis for The American Journalist: A Portrait of U.S. News People and Their Work by David H. Weaver and G. Cleveland Wilhoit (1986). A systematic random sample of lists of editorial employees from randomly selected news organizations was used and telephone interviews were conducted by Market Interviews, a subsidiary of Market Opinion Research in Detroit. (A more complete description of the sampling frame and data collection can be found in Appendix I of The American Journalist.) Interview length ranged between 20 and 40 minutes and the overall response rate was 80 percent.

The criterion variable for this study was measured through content analysis of journalists' responses to several open-ended questions about a story that represented some of their "best work" from the previous year. The questions were:

(a) I'd like to talk with you about a story you think represents some of your best work. Can you pick one of the best stories you've been involved in during the past year and tell me briefly what it was about?

(b) Why do you think that this story is particularly good? Any other reasons?

(c) While working on this story what thoughts, if any did you have about your audience?

Responses to these questions were recorded verbatim by telephone interviewers and were coded as a group since evidence for the content categories of interest might be present in responses to any of the three questions.

Weaver and Wilhoit did a factor analysis of items dealing with respondents' assessment of the importance of several mass media roles. From the factor analysis, they were able to identify three distinct attitudes about the role of the press which are followed by journalists. These three factors adversarial, interpretive and disseminator are the same roles used for predictor variables in this study. In addition, coding of the open-ended questions involved looking for evidence of these ten media roles in the stories representing "best work" discussed by the respondents. The content categories suggested by these original media roles reflect the items used to create three role indexes after factor analysis determined which items tended to group together. The items used, both for creation of role concept indexes and to indicate content categories, are:

Adversarial:

Adversarial stance toward government
Adversarial stance toward business

Interpretive:

Analysis or interpretation of complex problems
Investigate claims made by government
Discuss national policy as it is being developed

Disseminator:

Timely--gets information to the public quickly
Concentrate on appealing to the widest possible audience

Coders characterized the stories discussed as primarily a disseminator story, an interpretive story, or an adversarial story based on the above criteria and also on responses to the following questions:

For Disseminator Role: Does story try to convey only the facts? Does respondent use words like: objective, get the facts?

For Interpretive Role: Does story try to explain the "why?" Does respondent use words like: explain, analyze, understand, show why something happened, background?

For Adversarial Role: Does story display skepticism toward an individual or an institution of business or government? Does respondent use words like: challenged, confront, skeptical?

Discriminant analysis was used to predict membership in the criterion groups represented by the content categories. Discriminant analysis is a technique which allows examination of two or more groups of objects with respect to other variables simultaneously. It is an appropriate technique for examining the relationship of several predictor variables to a nominal-level criterion variable--in this case, a content variable with three categories. Three separate discriminant analyses allow examination of those variables with the greatest predictive ability under conditions where the story described by the respondent is either: 1) disseminator-type story or not; 2) interpretive-type story or not; or 3) adversarial-type story or not. Results from these three analyses can then be compared to the overall, three-group discriminant analysis, where the criterion variable consists of content groups disseminator, interpretive or adversarial (see Table 1).

The predictor variables used in all the discriminant analyses include: media type (daily newspaper, weekly newspaper, magazine, television, radio or wire service); organizational characteristics (whether editorial employees belong to a union, organization size measured by number of newsroom employees, and whether organization is locally or group owned); journalists' role orientation (whether respondent adheres to disseminator,

interpretive or adversarial role based on individual score on three role indexes); and individual characteristics (income, sex, age and political orientation [measured by respondents' self-placement on scale of 0 to 100 where 0 was extreme left and 100 extreme right]).

Because several of the predictor variables are nominal-level variables, they must be entered into the discriminant analysis equation as a series of binary or "dummy" variables. This creates a problem in interpreting the standardized discriminant function coefficients for variables with more than two categories since coefficients must be assessed by comparing them to the binary variable left out of the equation. For this study a series of discriminant analyses were run and each time a different binary variable was left out. The coefficients reported here are average coefficients from these analyses. Tests of significance, significance levels and the percentage of correctly classified cases are also reported as averages from these multiple discriminant analyses.[1] In addition to the discriminant analysis, crosstabulations add to the understanding of the relationship between the content variable and several of the predictor variables of interest.

Results

Results from the three-group discriminant analysis indicate that not all journalists' role orientations are equal when it comes to predicting content categories. Nor can political orientation and gender be ignored. However, media types--especially employment at a weekly or a daily newspaper--emerge

as powerful predictors of media content.

Table 1 about here

By comparing the coefficients generated by the three-group analysis with those associated with the two-group discriminant analyses, it is possible to interpret the relative importance of the various predictor variables as they relate to membership in one of the three content categories or not, and also to their utility in determining membership in one of three groups.

Consider the coefficients associated with media type. In the three-group analysis, weekly newspaper and daily newspaper (with coefficients of .93 and .52 respectively) carry the greatest utility in predicting one of three content categories. Radio (.33) and Television (.29) provide a second tier of predictive ability, and Wire Service (.20) and Magazine (.17) follow with somewhat less predictive ability. Because the standardized discriminant function coefficients are presented, it is possible to say, for example, that knowing a respondent works for a weekly newspaper (.93) is about three times as useful in predicting whether that person will write a disseminator, interpretive or adversarial story than is knowing a respondent works for radio (.33).

With respect to other organizational characteristics, organizational size (.28) is of greater predictive ability than knowing if editorial employees belong to a union (.21) or whether the media organization is group-owned (.08).

Knowing that a journalist adheres to the disseminator or adversarial role orientation (.12 and .13 respectively) is of less utility in predicting what type of story that journalist might write than is knowing they identify with the interpretive role (.30). And other individual characteristics--primarily sex (.46) and Political Orientation (.30)--are at least as useful (and in fact, more useful) in predicting story content. Age (.02) and income (.03) are of little value in predicting content in the three-group analysis.

However, income provides an interesting opportunity to examine how the utility of these variables as predictors of story content may change in the two-group analyses. Income, for example, is of little utility in predicting whether an individual will write a disseminator story or not (.03), while of somewhat greater utility (.36) in predicting whether they might write an interpretive story or not. The predictive ability of income is quite high, however, in predicting the possibility of writing an adversarial story (.66). This finding is consistent with findings in the original Weaver and Wilhoit study that found journalists with high salaries were more likely to follow the interpretive role over the disseminator role. These results would suggest that, when controlling for all other factors, income is a stronger predictor of adversarial-type stories, a fairly strong predictor of interpretive-type stories, but is of little use in predicting disseminator-type stories.

Each of the four discriminant analyses reported in Table 1 is significant at the .003 level or greater (exact significance levels are reported for each analysis in Table 1). An additional

measure of the utility of all the predictive variables considered together in their ability to discriminate between groups is the percentage of correctly classified cases. The know-group distributions generated through content analysis are reflected in the percentage of correctly classified cases reported here. That is, correct classification does not rely on chance distribution (which would be 50% in each group in the two-group analysis; 33 1/3% in each group in the three-group analysis), but on actual distribution in the population based on the best estimate of that distribution (the content analysis).

The use of crosstabulations of several variables identified in the discriminant analyses discussed above are useful in examining the relationships between two variables at a time. Tables 2 through 5 are included for this purpose.

Table 2 about here

Table 2 shows that significant patterns emerge in the relationship of type of medium to media content. Respondents who work for weekly newspapers were more likely to write disseminator-type stories (77%) than were respondents from other media types (excluding wire service, which has a very small frequency in this analysis). Respondents who work for daily newspapers were more likely to write disseminator-type stories (63%) than were television, radio and news magazine employees (55%, 56% and 57% respectively). Weekly newspaper respondents were also the least likely (16%) to write interpretive stories,

while 35% of magazine respondents wrote such stories. And adversarial stories were cited by broadcast respondents more frequently than for other media types.

Table 3 about here

Table 3 represents the relationship between journalists' role orientation and media content. While the differences in media content according to role orientation are not significant (which is consistent with the low coefficients generated by the discriminate analyses) at the .01 level ($p = .07$), it is useful to consider the distribution of the kinds of stories produced by journalists according to the role with which they identify. The small number of adversarial respondents may also limit the utility of the analysis, however, 56% of adversarial-role journalists cite interpretive stories as their best work. Note, too, the greater likelihood of disseminator-role journalists to write disseminator-type stories (68%) and not adversarial-type stories (8%), while 61% of interpretive-role journalists write disseminator-type stories and 13% adversarial-type stories.

Table 4 about here

Table 4 represents the relationship between sex and media content, and illustrates a significant difference between the percentages of men and women who write different type stories. Fifty-nine percent of men wrote disseminator stories while 69% of women wrote them; 28% of men and 22% of women wrote

interpretive stories while 13% of men and 9% of women wrote adversarial stories.

Table 5 about here

Table 5 illustrates the relationship between organization size and the type of media content produced. While there are minor differences in the distribution of disseminator, interpretive or adversarial stories for organizations of fewer than 30 or more than 100, in organizations with between 30 and 99 editorial employees, respondents were more likely to write interpretive stories (40%).

Discussion

The primary purpose of this study was to examine how media content is influenced by journalists' role concepts and organizational characteristics. Because little empirical work has examined the relationship of media content to these dual influences in the same study, the main contribution of this study has been to establish empirically that, in fact, both sets of influences have a part in shaping the kind of content journalists produce. However, organizational characteristics do seem to have a stronger influence than journalists' conceptions of their own role, although other individual characteristics of journalists are also significant in discriminating among content categories.

Organizational characteristics--especially the type of media organizations where journalists work and the size of these organizations--emerge in this study as strong predictors of

content category. Yet journalists' role conceptions--especially for journalists who adhere to the interpretive role--provide evidence that role orientation is also an influence of some significance. The strong influence of the respondent's gender in discriminating among content categories is of great interest, as is the significant discriminating utility of knowing a respondent's political orientation.

There are, of course, limitations to this study which must be considered. The primary limitation--that the "content" variable is represented by descriptions of respondents' "best work" instead of with actual content--can not be easily dismissed. One could speculate that the reason journalists' role orientation is no greater predictor of media content is because when asked to give examples of "best work," respondents didn't use their own criteria to judge the worth of their stories. Instead of using criteria which might correspond to the roles they identified as appropriate for journalists, they may have used criteria by which they expect others to judge their work. In some cases, respondents mentioned their "best" story from the previous year was an award-winning one, or that it was a page-one story. These are indications that someone else (a page-one editor or a contest judge) might have colored the respondent's perception of which story was best. The most appropriate method to avoid this kind of undetectable bias would be to study a random sample of stories from each respondent. Obviously it would have been outside the limitations of this study, but such an approach might be applied in further research on this topic.

Hirsch (1977) has suggested that journalists do not work in isolation, but operate as professionals within organizations, fully aware that personal attitudes or stereotypes ought not bias the work they create. Hirsch suggests that journalists recognized that they must meet organizational, occupational and audience expectations, and their subjective bias toward a story might be either organizationally dictated, the result of their individual belief about it--or both. It seems evident from the results of this study that Hirsch was right--both journalists' personal opinions and characteristics and the characteristics of the organizations for which they work are found empirically to have a significant influence on the kinds of content journalists produce.

End Notes

[1]For the variables measuring media type, for example, six binary variables are created--each representing "employed or not employed" at one of the six media organization types. To avoid problems of perfect collinearity in the discriminant function equation, one of the six binary variables must be left out of the analysis. Six separate discriminant analyses were run, each time leaving out a different category of media type. Then coefficients were averaged for easier interpretation. As an example, the following were the data used to calculate the average coefficients for the three-way discriminant analysis:

Media Type	Run1	Run2	Run3	Run4	Run5	Run6	Avg.
Daily NP	-	.70	.44	.33	.21	.90	.52
Weekly NP	.64	-	.98	.90	.79	1.34	.93
Magazine	.05	.37	-	.07	.02	.34	.17
TV	.17	.68	.13	-	.03	.45	.29
Radio	.07	.65	.24	.15	-	.56	.33
Wire	.20	.11	.23	.23	.21	-	.20

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Table 1 Predicting Disseminator, Interpretive or Adversarial Media Content with Two- and Three-Group Discriminant Function Analysis (N = 703)

Predictor Variables	Content Criterion Variables: Disseminator or Not*	Interpretive or Not*	Adversarial or Not*	Diss, Inter or Adver**
Media Type				
Daily Newspaper	.48[a]	.63	.55	.52
Weekly Newspaper	.69	.69	.41	.93
Magazine	.24	.34	.37	.17
Television	.31	.42	.42	.29
Radio	.39	.41	.56	.33
Wire service	.78	.85	.50	.20
Organizational Characteristics				
Belong to Union	.12	.25	.02	.21
Organizational Size	.03	.22	.40	.28
Group Owned	.12	.02	.04	.08
Role Orientation				
Disseminator Role	.10	.05	.26	.12
Interpretive Role	.19	.18	.25	.30
Adversarial Role	.01	.23	.12	.13
Individual Characteristics				
Income	.03	.36	.66	.03
Sex (male = 0)	.31	.30	.25	.46
Age	.17	.04	.33	.02
Political Orientation	.25	.28	.01	.30
X^2 =	78.28	40.26	29.43	52.97
df =	14	14	14	28
p =	.0000	.0004	.0092	.0033
% correctly classified	62.04%	80.49%	90.72%	64.00%

*Binary variables reflecting membership or non-membership in one of three content groups (two-group analyses).

**Criterion variable reflecting memberships in one of three content groups (three-group analysis). A second, non-significant function from this analysis is not reported.

[a]Entries associated with variable labels are average standardized discriminan function coefficients.

Table 2 Crosstabulation of Disseminator, Interpretive or Adversarial Media Content with Type of Medium (N = 794)

Media Content	Type of Medium					
	Daily NP	Weekly NP	Magaz	Radio	TV	Wire
Disseminator	63%	77%	57%	56%	55%	100%
Interpretive	26%	16%	35%	27%	30%	-
Adversarial	12%	7%	9%	17%	16%	-

$X^2 = 24.66$
df = 10
p = .01

(percentages do no total 100% because of rounding)

Table 3 Crosstabulation of Disseminator, Interpretive or Adversarial Media Content by Disseminator, Interpretive or Adversarial Role Orientatic (N = 756)

Media Content	Type of Role Orientation		
	Dissem	Interp	Adv
Disseminator	68%	61%	44%
Interpretive	24%	26%	56%
Adversarial	8%	13%	-

$X^2 = 8.67$
df = 4
p = .07

Table 4 Crosstabulation of Disseminator, Interpretive or Adversarial Media Content by Sex (N = 756)

Media Content	Sex	
	Male	Female
Disseminator	59%	69%
Interpretive	28%	22%
Adversarial	13%	9%

$X^2 = 8.76$
df = 2
p = .01

Table 5 Crosstabulation of Disseminator, Interpretive or Adversarial Media Content by Organization Size (measured by number of editorial employees) (N = 792)

Media Content	Number of Editorial Employees			
	<10	10-29	30-99	>100
Disseminator	67%	69%	47%	64%
Interpretive	20%	22%	40%	25%
Adversarial	13%	10%	13%	12%

$X^2 = 28.49$
df = 6
p = .000

(percentages do not total 100% because of rounding)